

VZCZCXR08737
OO RUEHCHI RUEHCN RUEHDT RUEHHM
DE RUEHBK #0125/01 0161057

ZNY CCCCC ZZH
O 161057Z JAN 09
FM AMEMBASSY BANGKOK
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 5680
INFO RUEAIIA/CIA WASHINGTON DC IMMEDIATE
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC IMMEDIATE
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC IMMEDIATE
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHINGTON DC IMMEDIATE
RHHMUNA/CDR USPACOM HONOLULU HI IMMEDIATE
RUEHZS/ASSOCIATION OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN NATIONS
RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 6689
RUEHBY/AMEMBASSY CANBERRA 9357
RUEHUL/AMEMBASSY SEOUL 5209
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 1318
RUEHWL/AMEMBASSY WELLINGTON 2568
RUEHCHI/AMCONSUL CHIANG MAI 6081

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 BANGKOK 000125

SIPDIS

NSC FOR PHU

E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/16/2018

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PINR](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [TH](#)

SUBJECT: SOUTHERN VIOLENCE: NEW PM ABHISIT'S PLAN FOR
DEALING WITH THE INSURGENCY, SOUTHERN GRIEVANCES

REF: BANGKOK 3757 (AMBASSADOR ENGAGES NEW THAI FM
KASIT)

BANGKOK 00000125 001.2 OF 004

Classified By: DCM JAMES F. ENTWISTLE, REASON 1.4 (B, D)

Summary and Comment:

¶1. (C) In a press conference for the Foreign Correspondents, Club of Thailand on January 14, Prime Minister Abhisit said resolution of the conflict in southern Thailand was among his government's top policy priorities. He said his government would restore the rule of law in all of Thailand, including the South. The foundation of his plan involved establishing a new office directly responsible to the Prime Minister's office to coordinate all aspects of the government's response to the unrest in the deep south. In a subsequent meeting, the leading southern policy official in the PM's office acknowledged the difficulty the new government would have in establishing this new office via legislation, but said Abhisit wanted to move forward quickly.

In the interim, Abhisit had set up a special committee within his cabinet to deal with the South, announced January ¶13. Both Abhisit and his policy coordinator stressed that justice in the South was a key issue in resolving the conflict. Abhisit indicated he expected to see progress in the key human rights cases of Imam Yapa Kasing, and disappeared lawyer Somchai Neelaphaijit. His policy coordinator acknowledged the general problem the government had with human rights in the South and said the Democrats would put an end to the abuses. Abhisit and his "South team" are scheduled to travel to the deep south January 17.

¶2. (C) Comment: Abhisit and the Democrats are serious about finding a solution to the ongoing violence in the South, but they face many obstacles. The military is not yet on-board with Abhisit's plan to restructure the Southern Border Provinces Administrative Center (SBPAC), taking away authority and budget from military-led structures, and it is unclear how much support he actually has among politicians from the deep south. The DP relies heavily on minor parties in the governing coalition, and addressing issues such as governance in the South could have serious repercussions should it be perceived as undermining the unity of the Thai

state, or disempowering the armed forces. In late 2006, interim Prime Minister Surayud, a former Army Commander and Privy Councilor, drew heavy criticism for taking a conciliatory approach to the South. The insurgency in the South highlights the weaknesses in Thailand's systems of justice, rule of law, and governance. Resolution of this conflict will be politically painful for whatever political party tries to tackle it in a serious manner. As we have with previous governments, we will urge the new Democrat-led government to follow through on its rhetoric and make potentially unpopular decisions that might advance reconciliation in the South. End Summary and Comment.

Democrats and the South: A New Start?

¶3. (SBU) The emergence of the Democrat Party as the leader of Thailand's governing coalition in late December has led to widespread Thai media speculation that the government of Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva will bring new hope and energy to resolving the simmering conflict in southern Thailand. Southern Thailand -- though not the deep south wracked by insurgency -- has traditionally been a Democratic Party stronghold; currently, 49 out of 56 MPs from the 14 southernmost provinces are from the Democratic Party. Politicians such as Nipon Bunyamanee, a Democrat party list MP from Songkhla who will play a key role in southern policy working out of the PM's office, have declared that the new government will take action to deal with the insurgency within 90 days. Prime Minister Abhisit himself has commented in press statements that resolving the southern conflict is a top priority for his government. He has appointed Deputy Prime Minister Suthep Thaugsuban and Deputy Interior Minister Thaworn Senneam, another MP from Songkhla, to take the lead

BANGKOK 00000125 002.2 OF 004

in seeking a way to resolve the conflict, while announcing he himself will chair an interim committee dedicated to addressing problems in the south. Press reports and private insider comments also suggest former Prime Minister and senior Democratic Party advisor Chuan Leekpai will also likely play some role. Abhisit plans to lead a delegation of the interim committee to southern Thailand on January 17.

¶4. (SBU) The deep South affected by the insurgency, however, is more politically divided than the rest of southern Thailand; only five out of the 12 MPs from the deep South belong to the Democratic Party. Of the remaining seven MPs, three constitute the remnants of the Wada political faction and have joined the Motherland Party and Narathiwat MP Waemahaadee Waeda-oh in opposing the DP-led government. (Note: The Wada faction is a group of southern Muslim politicians led by Wan Mohammad Nor, a former MP and Interior Minister; the faction was a long-time part of the New Aspirations Party (NAP), led by former PM Chavalit, who merged the NAP with the now banned Thai Rak Thai Party in ¶2002. End note.) Although the parliamentary committee that deals with the unrest in southern Thailand has 36 members, the three Wada members have significant positions: Najmuddin Umar is the second vice chairman, Sugarno Matha is the secretary to the committee, and Areepen Utarasint is the committee's advisor. The committees, chairman is General Somchai Wisnuwong, a Puea Thai MP from Kanchanaburi.

The Prime Minister has a Plan

¶5. (U) At a press conference on January 14, Prime Minister Abhisit included the resolution of the conflict in southern Thailand as one of his government's five primary policy priorities. In a lengthy speech in which he vowed to restore political stability and promote reconciliation in Thailand through restoration of the rule of law, he said his government would not resort to the partisan application of justice. Speaking specifically about the violence in the South, Abhisit credited security forces for not allowing the

situation to deteriorate further, but said efforts to resolve the conflict through the work of security forces alone was not sustainable. He said his government intended to address the unrest through a comprehensive package that addresses issues of education, economic development and cultural diversity. He said his government would eventually do this through the establishment of a special organization to handle all affairs affecting the deep south, which would report directly to the office of the Prime Minister. He acknowledged that it would take a long time to pass the legislation necessary to establish this new office; in the mean time, he would establish a special cabinet committee to deal with the issue.

¶6. (U) Commenting on the issue of justice, Abhisit said the Emergency Decree had just been renewed for three months, the fourteenth consecutive time. He said he was not satisfied with the use of the Emergency Decree to fight the insurgency and had ordered a review of the use of the Emergency Decree in the South and an analysis of the government's application of criminal law to obtain prosecutions. He hoped that in the future, the Emergency Decree would not be needed. During the question and answer session, Abhisit responded to questions about the rule of law in southern Thailand, and about the prognosis for justice in the cases of Imam Yapa Kasing, the southern Imam who was tortured to death while in Army custody, and Somchai Neelaphaijit, the human rights lawyer who disappeared while investigating police abuses in southern Thailand. Abhisit praised the civil court's ruling on Yapa (akin to an inquest decision of wrongful death) because it was able to establish general responsibility for the death of Imam Yapa, and pointed to this as evidence of the rule of law in the South. Although he said nothing about the future prosecution of the perpetrators, he said he thought there "may be a change in the authority's stance" regarding the case. On the Somchai case, he responded to Somchai's wife/widow Anghana that he would do his best to see justice is served, and that he thought there was a good chance there

BANGKOK 00000125 003.2 OF 004

would be progress in the case.

The Details

¶7. (SBU) We met with Songkhla DP MP Niphon Boonyamani January 15 to get a more complete picture of Democrat plans for the South. Niphon confirmed to us that the cabinet had on January 13 approved plans to establish a special "southern cabinet" committee to oversee the situation in southern Thailand. He explained that the establishment of this committee was a temporary measure to form a unified government mechanism to deal with the southern insurgency while the government was working on legislation to establish a permanent organization to take on this function. He said this new organization would replace the Southern Border Provinces Administrative Center (SBPAC), currently subordinate to the military-run ISOC, and would have administrative control of the five southern most provinces of Narathiwat, Pattani, Songkhla, Satun, and Yala. He said the government, since 2004, had injected some 109 billion baht into the South and in fiscal year 2009 the budget for the South was 30 billion, excluding money for salaries and military operations. Niphon did not think the money for the South had been spent wisely and asserted that there needed to be better accountability for how it was spent. (Note: 1 billion baht is equivalent to about \$28.9 million. End note.)

¶8. (C) Explaining the rationale behind establishing the new office, Niphon said one of the major weak points in the government's prior strategy for addressing the southern issue was organizational: making the civilian organization responsible for social and economic development, the SBPAC, subordinate to military and security authorities in the Internal Security Operations Command (ISOC) was a mistake. According to Niphon, the SBPAC had no authority to spend

money or initiate projects without ISOC approval - which was a point of contention. He said that although ISOC had 8 billion baht to spend in the current fiscal year, it gave only 1.6 billion to SBPAC to spend, and also lacked mechanisms to spend allocated budgets on time on relevant projects. Niphon told us that there were also significant leadership issues that needed to be resolved in the SBPAC/ISOC relationship. He said the Director General of SBPAC, Pranai Suwanrath, was the Deputy PermSec of Interior and significantly outranked the Commander of the ISOC. Under the current structure, however, Pranai was forced to report to the ISOC commander, which also caused conflict and poor coordination.

¶9. (C) Niphon acknowledged that, although the Democrats wanted to break development operations (education, health, and other development projects) free from the security functions, the two responsible organizations would need to continue working closely together; the new law would clarify this relationship. Niphon said the Democrats had consulted with the military on changes to the SBPAC and that most military commanders on the ground in the South ("Colonels and below") agreed with the new approach. The problems, he said, were with military commanders in Bangkok who are accustomed to spending the ISOC money and "retired generals" offering advice and criticism. Niphon said the legislation to change the SBPAC had been approved by the Ministry of Interior but was currently stuck in the Ministry of Defense. The military wanted to be sure the restructuring did not interfere with security operations before they agreed, and Abhisit could not move the legislation forward without support from the military. Niphon believed the military also feared the ISOC would be subordinate to this new office; the government would have to continue to assure key military leaders that security forces would continue to remain in charge of security policy, operations, and budgets.

¶10. (SBU) Interestingly enough, Niphon claimed the southern Wada politicians, now in opposition, were on board for the Democrat's proposed plan. He said he had not had a chance to consult with all of them, but based on conversations with former Wada power broker Den Tomina and members of Wan

BANGKOK 00000125 004.2 OF 004

Mohammad Nor's circle of associates, he believed sitting politicians would be supportive.

¶11. (SBU) Aside from reforming the administrative structures for dealing with the southern unrest, Niphon said the Democrats had specific priorities that he believed would move the South towards reconciliation and peace. He said their priorities were poverty reduction, educational reform, and justice. Responding to questions about justice and allegations of human rights abuses in the South, Niphon acknowledged that abuses were occurring and said the Democrats would put an end to them. He lamented that abuses committed under the administration of former Prime Minister Thaksin led to the Tak Bai and Krue Sai Mosque tragedies. These incidents, he said, would color the way Malay Muslims in the deep south perceive the Thai government for many years to come. Continuing, he said he had recently gone to Malaysia and consulted Wan Kadir, the former chairman of BERSATU, a past umbrella organization for several militant groups, on the causes of the unrest. He said Wan Kadir, who is old and retired, told him that the brutality of the Thai state was directly responsible for the resurgence of the violence in the South. Niphon reiterated that the Democrats plan to change that.

JOHN